

Identification of Reading Difficulties in the Subject of English at Secondary Level: A Case Study of Federal Govt. Schools

Identification of Reading Difficulties in the Subject of English at Secondary Level: A Case Study of Federal Govt. Schools

By

Saima Rasheed¹, Azra Saleem², Qadir Bukhsh³, Saima Rasul³

³Department of Educational Training, The Islamia University, Bahawalpur-Pakistan

Abstract

Language is considered a strong weapon to develop and strengthen the relationship between human beings. The purpose of language learning is to enable a man to communicate in that particular language. In daily life communication people need and use a variety of language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading is one of the four macro skills to be developed as a means of effective communication in both first and second language learning context. It is a common observation that most of our students cannot read a text with suitable speed and proper understanding. The study was conducted in order to identify the Reading difficulties of students in the subject of English and a survey type research methodology was adopted to collect the data. A Questionnaire was designed for 280 students from 07 Federal Government Schools of Punjab, Pakistan. 20 students from grade 9 and 20 students from grade 10 were randomly selected from each school by giving equal representation to all the schools. The collected data was analyzed through SPSS and a comparison was made among the results of different respondent's observations. At the end of the study, the findings indicate that a significant majority of the respondents were of the opinion that they encountered the reading difficulties in pronunciation, vocabulary, accent, silent words, abbreviations, grammatical structure and in narrative writings. Majority of the respondents suggested that their reading skill can be improved by daily newspapers reading and story books, by frequent reading drills, visiting the different libraries and by providing extra reading sessions in formal class rooms.

Keywords: Language learning, communication skill, reading skill, reading difficulties, pronunciation, vocabulary, accent etc, newspapers and story books, reading drills, libraries.

Introduction

Language is defined as a system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members communicate (Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 13). This is a source through which the crown of the creation enabled to communicate with others even to animals. It can be said that language is a powerful and strong means of communication of thoughts, feelings, sentiments and intentions. Human beings alone use the language for communication.

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Every country has a “National Language” which is the means of communication of its thoughts and culture, and it covers the whole range of its social, cultural, and official activities. In the present age of fast developing science and technology, there also arises the need of a foreign language for access to the modern scientific knowledge and for international communication. In fact English has risen in the world esteem for many kinds of reasons--- political, economic, social and literary. Mumtaz (2006) explained that English has achieved the status of the language for international communication. English is learned everywhere because people have found out that knowledge of English is the passport of better career, advanced knowledge and for communication with entire world. So we should enable our students to master of four basic skills of English language. These skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills can be classified as receptive and productive skills. Listening and speaking fall under the category of receptive skills. Contrary to it speaking and writing are productive skills. All these skills are normally well connected with each other by two parameters:

- 1- The mode of communication / oral or written
- 2- The direction of communication/ means the receiving or producing the message

The interaction among these skills can be represented in the following chart:

Communication	Oral	Written
Receptive	Reading	Listening
Productive	Speaking	Writing

There are two receptive skills; reading and listening. Reading is not to pronounce or utter the voices but it means to recognize and understand the pronounced sounds. It develops reading speed, accent and pronunciation. It also develops the listening and speaking skills. Reading skill is developed in societies with an extremely developed literary traditions and culture. Reading helps to increase vocabulary which helps for listening comprehension too. The first revelation of the Noble Quran has laid stress on reading; “Read in the name of your Lord who created. He created the man from a clot of blood. Read . . . “The Noble Quran (chapter 30 Surah –Alaq Verses 1-3). Reading is a gateway to the world of knowledge and understanding. It is not simply pronouncing the words rather it is recognizing the words with their complete understanding. It is an ability which we gain after having good awareness of grammar, phonology, and semantics of the target language; social and cultural knowledge and the knowledge of the target subject Bajwa (2007). There is no point in looking for a simple definition of “Reading”. Reading is no different from all the other common words in our language; it has a multiplicity of meanings. As since the meaning of the word on any particular occasion will depend largely on the context in which it occurs, we should not expect that a single definition for reading will be found, let alone one that will throw light on its mystery. One cannot even ask such a ‘straightforward’ question as whether the process of reading necessarily entails comprehension Smith (2008, P. 163). In simple words, reading means looking at the written word and understanding the message. In this sense, it consists of two steps: recognizing the letters of the alphabets, and comprehension. At the higher stage,

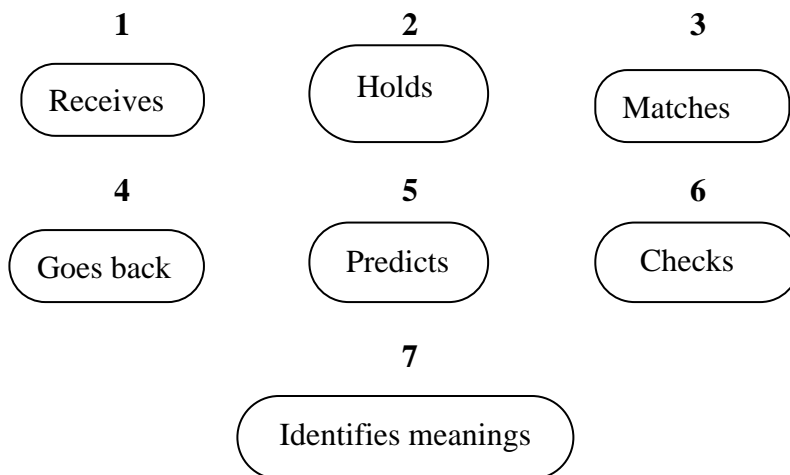
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comprehension is the most important aspect of reading Ahmed (2006). According to Hashmi (2004) reading is a process whereby one looks at and understands what has been written. The key word here is “understands” merely reading aloud without understanding does not count as reading. Asking the students to read aloud, if a teacher already knows that they can read, is an activity of very limited value.

Model of reading process

The reader goes through following stages;



(Adapted from A. I. O.U. Material)

Reading Difficulties:

Difficulties may be defined as the condition or quality of being difficult. Something not easily done, accomplished, comprehended, or solved. It is also a troublesome or embarrassing state of affairs as the difficulties of language learning. A condition that prevents someone from learning basic skills or information at the same rate as other people. A difficult idea or situation is like a knot or something that is tied up, tangled, or twisted. When you deal with it successfully, it is like untying it and getting rid of the knots and tangles (google.com).

Reading is a gateway to the world of knowledge and understanding. It frequently compels us to change our attitude, ideas and aspirations. Further, reading may motivate investigation and becomes an important factor in intellectual progress. Side by side it possesses many difficulties. Bajwa explained that there is no similarity between English and Pakistani languages. First, they differ in respect of their script. Secondly, English is written from right to left. Lastly, construction of English sentence is different from that of Pakistani languages. These differences create many difficulties for the students in our country to read the English text appropriately. He further said that students have been caught up in a fear of not being

able to learn English. In the presence of such a complex situation English proves a hard nut to crack. Although there are many problems which face our students while systematic effort can remove institutional as well as technical barriers. It is common observation that most of our students cannot read a text with suitable speed and proper understanding. Besides others, one of the reasons is that they are not taught how to read effectively and with a good speed. Mumtaz (2006) explained that in the classroom, a teacher has to teach the text book intensively. For the pronunciation of the reading skill of students, he adopts certain techniques and teaches the lesson in stages. Hashmi (2007) described that speed is an important factor in reading. A slow reader is not an efficient reader. Reading become useless if the material read is not understood by the reader in the first instance or if he has to make regressions for comprehending the material. The teacher should help the child in overcoming the common reading faults. Flipper (2004) narrated that vocalization and sub-vocalization are serious flaws which affects reading. This slows down efficient reading and hinders overall comprehension of a text. Wren, and Marten (2008) have pointed out that reading comprehension does not mean only looking at and understanding sentences in isolation. Understanding the plain sense of individual sentence is important. Effective reading is the ability to recognize the purpose of the text as a whole, to see how the text is organized, and to understand the relationship between sentences. Unfamiliar words in a text cause difficulty for the students. Some of the students stop over a word and look up for meaning in dictionary. What mystifies many parents is where and why the reading process breaks down. Although, the problems may occur in areas of, decoding, comprehension, retention, and lack of reading habits; following are the major difficulties which usually interrupt the reading process;

Difficulty of Vocabulary

For the learners, there are always numerous new words whose meanings are not clear to them. That is why they cannot understand the given texts. Children need a broad vocabulary of words that they understand and can use correctly to label their knowledge and experiences. The breadth and depth of a child's vocabulary provide the foundation for successful reading. Tomlinson (2007, P.18) described that oral vocabulary refers to words that are used in reading. Even children who have very extensive oral vocabulary may have great difficulty in reading words in print if they have a small reading vocabulary.

Difficulty of Spelling

The great problem with the Pakistani learners is spelling mistakes. The system of spelling in English language is very tricky. At many places spelling do not match with pronunciation. Our student makes numerous mistakes because of this variation. This difficulty has become overwhelming because of American and British varieties of English. Thus at early stages learners fall a victim to a lot of confusion Bajwa (2007). Bryant and Bradley (1983) described that if spelling is poor and careless, communication suffers; for either the reader is constantly held up through having to puzzle out what a word is, or else is positively misinformed.

Difficulty of Pronunciation

The next problem is that of pronunciation. A Pakistani learner needs to master a large number of sub-skills for achieving optimum level of pronunciation in English. Kaur (2006) explained that learning to acquire the pronunciation habits of English language, however involves a large number of new skills, especially recognition skills. Kelly (2006) illustrated that there are two key problems with pronunciation. Firstly, it is not neglected; it tends to be reactive to a particular problem that has arisen in the classroom rather than being strategically planned. He further explained that pronunciation tends to suffer from neglect may not be due to teachers lacking interest in the subject but rather to a feeling of doubt as to how to teach it.

Difficulty of Grammar

Lack of grammatical knowledge creates difficulty for student in reading student's grammar can be improved by story books. Campbell (2002, P. 151) described that many children have the advantage of having stories read to them at home. And they may have heard events described by adults as well as beginning to tell their own stories about things that have happened to them. All of this enables the children to develop their language. One aspect of this development is that the children will begin to acquire, intuitively, knowledge about grammar or sentence structure.

Difficulty of Speed Reading

Abraham (1993) narrated that speed of reading is very important in our age because it is the age of knowledge explosion. A lot is written daily. A slow reader cannot keep pace with the modern times. Bajwa (2007, P.111) explained that the readers who are very slow or extra ordinary fast in reading are unlikely to understand the text. The reader has to be flexible and adjust his speed according to the nature of the text. If the text is difficult, the speed is to be slowed down. If the text is easy and less decently packed with information, the speed is to be enhanced.

Difficulty of Skimming and Scanning

Bajwa (2007, P.115) narrated that skimming means collecting overall meanings and scanning means reaching a spot for specific information. When we apply these skills we do not waste our time in looking about aimlessly. Halsey (1998) described that Skimming is used to quickly identify the main ideas of a text. While reading the newspaper, probably it is not be read word for word, instead of scanning the text. Hywel (2003) illustrated that scanning is a technique which is often used for looking up a word in the telephone book or dictionary key words or ideas is searched out. In most cases a reader knows what he/she is looking for, so the concentration remains on finding a particular answer.

There are also some numerous difficulties which readers face during the reading that are;

- Troubling sounding out words and recognizing words out of context.
- Confusion between letters and sounds.

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- Slow oral reading rate due to word-by-word reading.
- Reading without expression.
- Ignoring punctuation while reading.
- Confusion about the meaning of words and sentences.
- Inability to connect ideas in a passage.
- Lack of concentration during reading.
- Trouble in remembering or summarizing what is read.
- Too many eye-fixations.
- Moving finger along the line and head movement.
- Insufficient prior knowledge of the subject matter.
- Improper physical conditions for reading (e.g. poor or very bright light, noise etc).
- Difficulty in comprehension due to poor vocabulary.
- Lip movement and sub-vocalization.
- Slowness in word recognition.
- Digression or breaks in attention.
- Difficulty of selection from redundant material.
- Insufficient knowledge about grammar.
- Antonyms, synonyms, contrast and opposite words causes of difficulties in reading.

Objectives of the Study:

This study was based on the following objectives;

- To review the existing situation of English Reading skill in Federal Government schools.
- To find out the Reading difficulties of students in the subject of English.
- To compare the performance of male and female students in English Reading skill.
- To make a comparison between the performance of English medium and Urdu medium school's students.
- To formulate some recommendations in order to develop the English Reading skill of students.

Research Methodology

Population

The intended target population of this study was the students of grade 9th and 10th at secondary level schools of Federal Government in Bahawalpur region.

Following schools were included in the research;

- Federal Government Boys Public School Bahawalpur Cantt.
- Federal Government Girls Public School Bahawalpur Cantt.
- Federal Government Girls High School Bahawalpur Cantt
- Federal Government Boys High School Trust Colony Bahawalpur.
- Federal Government Public School Bahawalnagar Cantt.

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- Federal Government Public School Mailsi Cantt.
- Federal Government Abbas Public School Deranawab Cantt

Sample

Sample consisting 280 students from 07 schools of Federal Government was taken randomly by giving equal representation to all the schools in Bahawalpur region. 40 students from grade 9th and 10th were selected randomly from each school to conduct the study.

Development of research tool and data collection

Since the study was descriptive in nature, survey approach was adopted to collect the data. For this purpose, a questionnaire of 39 items was developed on five-point (Likert) scale. The Questionnaire was validated through pilot testing on 40 students.

Data Analysis

The collected data through questionnaire were coded and analyzed through SPSS in terms of percentage and mean scores. Scale values assigned to each of the five responses was as

Level of Agreement	Scale Value
SA	5
A	4
UNC	3
DA	2
SDA	1

To calculate the mean score, following formula was used;
Mean Score = $(FSA*5+FA*4+FUNC*3+FDA*2+FSDA*1)$

N

FSA = Frequency of Strongly Agreed responses.

FA = Frequency of Agreed responses.

FUNC = Frequency of Uncertain responses.

FDA = Frequency of Disagreed responses.

FSDA = Frequency of Strongly Disagreed responses.

The findings from the data analysis are presented below;

Findings

Data collected through questionnaire were coded and analyzed through SPSS in terms of percentage and mean scores. The findings from the data analysis are given below;

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Vocabulary

Sr. #	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
1	Students read the English text book of secondary level appropriately.	N %	102 36.43	136 48.57	19 6.79	17 6.07	06 2.14	4.11
2	Students use the words for sentence formation.	N %	96 34.29	86 30.71	36 12.86	28 10.00	34 12.14	3.65
3	Teachers focused on vocabulary development of students.	N %	123 43.93	57 20.36	48 17.14	22 7.86	30 10.71	3.79
4	Students feel difficulty while reading the silent words i.e. knowledge, psychology, and physician.	N %	77 27.50	90 32.14	34 12.14	39 13.93	40 14.29	3.45
5	Students make numerous mistakes in reading because of spelling variations.	N %	76 27.14	100 35.71	29 10.36	53 18.93	22 7.86	3.55
6	Difference between letters and sounds create difficulty for students in reading of English text.	N %	89 31.79	110 39.29	29 10.36	29 10.36	23 8.21	3.76

Table: 1 indicates that a significant majority (85%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that students read English text books of secondary level appropriately. The mean score 4.11 also supported the statement. Majority of the respondents (65% with 3.65 mean score) were of the opinion that students use words for sentence formation. Majority of the respondents (64%) expressed their views that teachers focused on vocabulary development of students and mean score 3.79 also supported the statement. A slight majority (59.64%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that students feel difficulty while reading the silent words i.e. knowledge, psychology, and physician and mean score 3.45 also supported it. A majority of the respondents (62.85% with 3.55 mean score) agreed with the statement that students make numerous mistakes in reading because of spelling variations. A prominent majority (80%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that difference between letters and sounds create difficulty for students in reading of English text and mean score 3.76 also supported the statement.

Pronunciation

Sr. #	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
7	Teachers always focus on pronunciation i.e. accent,	N %	116 41.43	91 32.50	25 8.93	24 8.57	24 8.57	3.90

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	sounds, stress.							
8	Pronunciation is improved due to reading habits i.e. casual reading of news-papers or Story books.	N %	144 51.43	73 26.07	26 9.29	15 5.36	22 7.86	4.08
9	Students feel difficulty in pronunciation due to insufficient knowledge about stress on word or sentence, phonetics, phonemes etc.	N %	92 32.86	105 37.50	41 14.64	26 9.29	16 5.71	3.83
10	Students can pronounce the new words with their correct accent.	N %	43 15.36	113 40.36	41 14.64	62 22.14	21 7.50	3.34
11	The system of pronunciation in English is radically different from that of Pakistani languages.	N %	125 44.64	74 26.43	31 11.07	23 8.21	27 9.64	3.88
12	Students pronounce rhyming words/poetic text with their correct accent.	N %	58 20.71	70 25.00	67 23.93	49 17.50	36 12.86	3.23

It is evident from Table: 2 that a significant majority (73.93%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that teachers always focus on pronunciation i.e. accent, sounds, stress. The mean score 3.90 also supported the statement. A prominent majority of the respondents (77% with 4.08 mean score) were of the opinion that pronunciation is improved due to reading habits i.e. casual reading of news-papers or story books. Majority of the respondents (70%) expressed their views that students feel difficulty in pronunciation due to insufficient knowledge about stress on word or sentence, phonetics, phonemes etc and mean score 3.83 also supported the statement. A slight majority (55.72%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that students can pronounce the new words with their correct accent and mean score 3.34 also supported it. A significant majority of the respondents (71% with 3.88 mean score) agreed with the statement that the system of pronunciation in English is radically different from that of Pakistani languages. 45.71% of the respondents agreed with the statement that students pronounce rhyming words/poetic text with their correct accent and mean score 3.23 also supported the statement.

Reading Opportunities

Sr. #	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
13	Interesting reading material is available at your school.	N %	63 22.50	48 17.14	19 6.79	39 13.93	111 39.64	2.69
14	Reading activities are conducted in the class room i.e. Reading drills, Reading competitions.	N %	38 13.57	53 18.93	61 21.79	47 16.79	81 28.93	2.71
15	Teachers provide extra help to students for developing their reading skill.	N %	83 29.64	82 29.29	30 10.71	37 13.21	48 17.14	3.41
16	Students have provided some library periods to develop their reading skill.	N %	29 10.36	26 9.29	26 9.29	61 21.79	138 49.29	2.10
17	Your schools provide you access to any other libraries.	N %	19 6.79	44 15.71	31 11.07	66 23.21	121 43.21	2.20

Table: 3 shows that a slight majority (53.57%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that interesting reading material is available at schools. The mean score 2.69 also supported the statement. 45.72% respondents disagreed with the statement that reading activities are conducted in the class room i.e. Reading drills, Reading competitions and mean score 2.71 also supported it. A slight majority (58.93) expressed their views that teachers provide extra help to students for developing their reading skill and mean score 3.41 also supported the statement. A significant majority (71.8%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that students have provided some library periods to develop their reading skill and mean score 2.10 also supported it. A majority of the respondents (66.42% with 2.20 mean score) disagreed with the statement that schools provide you access to any other libraries.

Reading Activities

Sr. #	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
18	Role-play is an appropriate activity to develop the English reading skill.	N %	64 22.86	100 35.71	70 25.00	27 9.64	19 6.79	3.58
19	Student's fluency in English reading is improved due to reading activities.	N %	113 40.36	103 36.79	29 10.36	18 6.43	17 6.07	3.99
20	The use of A.V Aid is helpful to improve the English reading skill.	N %	68 24.29	100 35.71	78 27.86	21 7.50	13 4.64	3.68

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21	Head or finger movement creates difficulty for Students in order to read fluently.	N %	37 13.21	69 24.64	66 23.57	70 25.00	38 13.57	2.99
22	Story-books and News-papers are helpful to develop the reading skill.	N %	181 64.64	54 19.29	21 7.50	11 3.93	13 4.64	4.35

Table: 4 represents that a slight majority (58.57%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that Role-play is an appropriate activity to develop the English reading skill. The mean score 3.58 also supported the statement. A significant majority of the respondents (77.05 with 3.99 mean score) were of the opinion that Student's fluency in English reading is improved due to reading activities. Majority of the respondents (60%) expressed their views that the use of A.V Aid is helpful to improve the English reading skill and mean score 3.68 also supported the statement. 38.57% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that Head or finger movement creates difficulty for Students in order to read fluently and mean score 2.99 also supported it. A prominent majority (83.93) of the respondents agreed with the statement that story-books and News-papers are helpful to develop the reading skill and mean score 4.35 also supported the statement.

Teaching Method in Reading

Sr. #	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
23	Students are satisfied with the methodology of teacher in order to develop the reading skill.	N %	94 33.57	118 42.14	36 12.86	19 6.79	13 4.64	3.93
24	Teachers focus on translation method i.e. word for word translation.	N %	127 45.36	73 26.07	27 9.64	35 12.50	18 6.43	3.91
25	Reading material always relevant to the objectives of the course.	N %	63 22.50	96 34.29	72 25.71	32 11.43	17 6.07	3.56
26	Teachers use some activities to improve Student's reading abilities.	N %	43 15.36	43 15.36	53 18.93	80 28.57	61 21.79	2.74
27	Teacher gives some extra material to the students in order to develop their reading habit.	N %	55 19.64	43 15.36	33 11.79	69 24.64	80 28.57	2.73

It is evident from Table: 5 that a significant majority (75.71%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that students are satisfied with the methodology of teacher in order to develop

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the reading skill. The mean score 3.93 also supported the statement. A significant majority of the respondents (71.43% with 3.91 mean score) were of the opinion that Teachers focus on translation method i.e. word for word translation. A slight majority of the respondents (56.79) expressed their views that Reading material always relevant to the objectives of the course and mean score 3.56 also supported the statement. A slight majority (50.36%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that teachers use some activities to improve Student's reading abilities and mean score 2.74 also supported it. A slight majority of the respondents (53.23%% with 2.73 mean score) disagreed with the statement that teachers gives some extra material to the students in order to develop their reading habit.

Nature of Text

S r. #	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
28	Students feel difficulty to read the literary or scientific text.	N %	74 26.43	110 39.29	36 12.86	28 10.00	32 11.43	3.59
29	Lack of previous knowledge about English language creates difficulty for Students in reading.	N %	109 38.93	105 37.50	35 12.50	19 6.79	12 4.29	4.00
30	Some linguistic, cultural or conceptual difficulties makes Students confuse while reading.	N %	62 22.14	127 45.36	54 19.29	22 7.86	15 5.36	3.71
31	Abbreviations create difficulties for Students in reading.	N %	80 28.57	91 32.50	49 17.50	34 12.14	26 9.29	3.59
32	Narrative writing creates difficulties for Students in reading.	N %	55 19.64	109 38.93	48 17.14	48 17.14	20 7.14	3.47

Table: 6 indicate that a majority (65.72%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that students feel difficulty to read the literary or scientific text. The mean score 3.59 also supported the statement. A significant majority of the respondents (77.47% with 4.00 mean score) were of the opinion that Lack of previous knowledge about English language creates difficulty for Students in reading. Majority of the respondents (67.50) expressed their views that some linguistic, cultural or conceptual difficulties makes Students confuse while reading and mean score 3.71 also supported the statement. A majority (61.07%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that Abbreviations create difficulties for students in reading and mean score 3.55 also supported it. A slight majority of the respondents (58.57%% with 3.47 mean score) agreed with the statement that narrative writing creates difficulties for students in reading.

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Circumstances

Sr .#	Statement	f%	SA	A	UNC	DA	SDA	Mean score
33	Lack of interest creates difficulties for students in reading.	N %	146 52.14	77 27.50	32 11.43	10 3.57	15 5.36	4.18
34	Lack of motivation creates difficulties for students in reading.	N %	106 37.86	102 36.43	47 16.79	19 6.79	06 2.14	4.01
35	Weak eye-sight creates difficulties for students in reading.	N %	136 48.57	75 26.79	37 13.21	23 8.21	09 3.21	4.09
36	Students of English medium schools are more fluent in English reading than that of Urdu medium schools.	N %	137 48.93	69 24.64	26 9.29	20 7.14	28 10.00	3.95
37	Male students are more fluent in English reading than female students.	N %	53 18.93	42 15.00	41 14.64	34 12.14	110 39.29	2.62

Table: 7 shows that a significant majority (79.64%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that lack of interest creates difficulties for students in reading. The mean score 4.18 also supported the statement. A prominent majority of the respondents (74.29% with 4.01 mean score) were of the opinion that lack of motivation creates difficulties for students in reading. A significant majority of the respondents (75.36%) expressed their views that weak eye-sight creates difficulties for students in reading and mean score 4.09 also supported the statement. A significance majority (73.57%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that students of English medium schools are more fluent in English reading than that of Urdu medium schools and mean score 3.95 also supported it. A slight majority (51.43) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that male students are more fluent in English reading than female students and mean score 2.62 also supported the statement.

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